



## Dalit Women's Oppression in Ancient Texts: A Feminist Critique of Manusmriti

Kranti Devi Lodhi<sup>1</sup> & Dr. Nisha Indraguru<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Government Autonomous Girls P.G. College of Excellence, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India

Email: [Krantilodhi23@gmail.com](mailto:Krantilodhi23@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Government Autonomous Girls P.G. College of Excellence, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India

Email: [drnisha.indraguru@mp.gov.in](mailto:drnisha.indraguru@mp.gov.in)

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### Abstract

This study explores the convergence of caste and gender-based oppression experienced by Dalit women, examining how religiously sanctioned social hierarchies perpetuate their marginalization. The caste system, a longstanding feature of Indian civilization, is rooted, according to historians, in the invasion of the Aryans, whose descendants, today's Brahmins, produced the Vedas, Shastras, and Shrutis to establish and govern the social structure. The Manusmriti, a sacred text revered by Hindus, particularly Brahmins, posits the supremacy of Brahmins as the earth's most sacred creation, thereby granting them societal control while relegating Dalits, or Shudras, to the lowest stratum. Consequently, Dalits have been historically excluded from social events due to their status as an untouchable community. Furthermore, women, within the Manu framework, are characterized as deceptive, insignificant, and unworthy. The Manusmriti contains passages that address Dalits and women who defy the authority of the Indian Constitution. Babasaheb Ambedkar, as a leader of the Shudras, fought for their rights and symbolically contested the Manusmriti by setting it ablaze on December 25, 1927. This analysis examines the role of the Manusmriti in shaping caste and gender norms in Indian society, with a specific focus on Dalit women who are positioned at the nadir of both caste and gender hierarchies. Employing an intersectional feminist perspective, this study seeks to understand how the Manusmriti contributes to the perpetuation of discriminatory laws and practices. The study concludes that addressing the historical roots of Dalit women's oppression is essential for dismantling persistent discriminatory systems and fostering social justice.

**Keywords:** Dalit Women, Manusmriti, Caste, Gender, Oppression, Social Hierarchies, Intersectional Feminism.

## 1. Introduction

The convergence of gender and caste in India has substantially influenced the socioeconomic and cultural status of Dalit women. Historically subjected to systemic oppression and marginalization, Dalit women's position at the intersection of gender and caste hierarchies has resulted in unique challenges. Many of these discriminatory practices are rooted in the Manusmriti, a Dharmashastra instrumental in establishing stringent caste boundaries and patriarchal standards that have historically governed Hindu social regulations (Doniger and Smith 23). The word "Dalit", derived from Sanskrit, signifies those who are downtrodden and oppressed, intrinsically linking the concept to the caste system and the varna framework, which ascribes the Dalit community to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy (Guha). The tenth mandala of the Rig-Veda elucidates the origin of the Varnas from Brahma's body (Raman and Ratnamala). Brahmins emerge from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs, and Shudras from the feet (Sato). In addition to prescribing stringent norms for female conduct and subordination to male authority, the text also legitimizes untouchability and caste-based exclusion. Scholars such as Ambedkar argue that the Manusmriti served as a religious and ideological mechanism for perpetuating caste injustice and Brahmanical hegemony (Ambedkar 25). The Manusmriti delineates stringent behavioral norms for women, emphasizing their subordination to male figures, and it also provides religious justification for caste-based exclusion and the practice of untouchability. Intellectuals, such as Ambedkar, posit that the Manusmriti functioned as a spiritual and ideological instrument that sustained Brahmanical dominance and the oppression of lower castes

(Ambedkar 25). The historical entrenchment of the caste system in India, with its roots in ancient Hindu scriptures and social practices codified in texts like the Manusmriti, has resulted in a deeply stratified society where individuals are ascribed a social status based on birth (Sato). This hierarchical structure, traditionally composed of Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers), has historically determined access to resources, opportunities, and social mobility (Abo-Zena and Rana). Violence and untouchability practices against the lower castes by the upper castes are justified in the Manusmriti (Kabiraj).

The concept of caste, derived from the Portuguese term "casta," initially denoted purity of lineage. Still, in the Indian context, it evolved to encompass concerns about contamination through impure food or physical contact, which underscores the social and hierarchical ordering of groups based on perceived purity and pollution (Dhanda). The caste system, deeply embedded in the religious ideology of Hinduism, derives its legitimacy from ancient texts like the Manusmriti, which articulate the concepts of varna, karma, and dharma (Jodhka). The system prescribes specific roles, duties, and social behaviors for each caste, reinforcing social hierarchies and limiting social mobility. Dalits are socially isolated, oppressed, and untouchable (Raman and Ratnamala). While the caste system's origins can be traced back to Vedic ritual hierarchies and consolidations through religious, social, and political institutions, its formal codification occurred during British colonialism, transforming flexible identity groups into fixed categories of administration, thereby solidifying caste as a technique of control (Sato). The term "Dalit," originating from Sanskrit, signifies the downtrodden and oppressed, and within the

Indian social structure, it is inextricably linked to the caste system and varna, designating Dalits as the lower untouchable castes or 'Pancham varna', whose status is ascribed by birth (Guha). Modern understanding and use of the term "Dalit" can be traced back to the 19th century with the work of social reformer Jyotirao Phule, while its conscious and political use became more popularized in the 20th century (Ranganathan). It serves as a symbol of collective identity and cultural politics (Muthukkalanjiyam). The term serves as a potent expression of social identity and political assertion, uniting various marginalized groups in their struggle for equality, justice, and human rights. The caste system, primarily associated with South Asia, particularly India, extends its influence to the diaspora, encompassing Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Muslim, and other religious groups known as jatis, as well as biradaris among South Asian Muslims (Akhtar). The complex interplay between caste and race reveals their shared function in establishing hierarchical social structures and systems of discrimination (Dwivedi). Colonial ideologies of race and climate have shaped the understanding of risk and resilience, impacting Dalit efforts to challenge this ideology and envision a socially just and sustainable relationship with the environment (Prasad). Scholars have noted that caste operates similarly to race, serving as a basis for discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion (Akhtar). The debate around caste as a form of racial discrimination gained momentum in the UK, particularly in the context of the Equality Act 2010. Section 9 of the Equality Act 2010, concerning 'race,' granted a government minister the discretion to amend the section to include caste as an aspect of race, which was later made mandatory by Section 69 of the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013.

Despite the legal provisions and safeguards in place, caste discrimination persists in various forms, affecting access to education, employment, housing, and social

interactions, thereby perpetuating historical inequalities and injustices. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the dominance of Brahmanical forces have exacerbated the marginalisation of Dalits, intensifying their vulnerabilities in the context of climate change (Sahana). Furthermore, Dalit feminist scholars point out that while much attention has been given to gender issues within upper-caste contexts, the specific condition of Dalit women—who experience oppression at the intersection of caste, class, and gender—has been historically neglected (Rege 14). This paper offers a critical analysis of how Dalit women are portrayed and positioned within the Manusmriti. It explores how the text legitimized caste-based gender violence, curtailed women's agency, and endorsed their marginalization from religious, social, and educational domains. Drawing on an intersectional feminist lens (Crenshaw 1241), the study examines how caste and gender functioned together as intertwined mechanisms of oppression targeting Dalit women. Additionally, it reflects on the enduring effects of these ancient directives on the ongoing fight of Dalit women for equality, dignity, and access to rights. By engaging with both historical scriptures and present-day Dalit feminist perspectives, the paper aims to enrich the discourse in critical caste and gender scholarship in India.

## **2. Historical and cultural perspective**

The caste system did not exist in ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.) since even the most learned men were good householders and had varied occupations. In terms of intelligence, education, and learning, women in ancient India were equal to males. She chose her companion based on her preferences, and marriage was customarily performed after reaching adulthood. She went to religious events, parties, and contests as she pleased. The remarriage of young widows was once a widespread practice (Thind). However, the composition and rigid enforcement of several Hindu religious texts—such as the Manusmriti, Atharva Veda, Vishnu

Smriti, and others—by the Brahmins (the dominant priestly caste) contributed to the development of a deeply unequal society where gender parity was virtually nonexistent (Agarwal). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a key figure in drafting the Indian Constitution, emphasized in his article *The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman* that these sacred Hindu scriptures are fundamentally responsible for the oppression faced by women in India (Thind; Agarwal).

**2.1 Origin and Authority of Manusmriti:** The Manusmriti, traditionally dated between 200 BCE and 200 CE, functioned as a significant moral and legal guide for Hindu society over an extended period. Often referred to as the *Manav Dharam Shastra*, it represents the earliest metrical work on Brahminical Dharma within Hinduism. Holding considerable authority, the Manusmriti is believed to be a direct revelation from Brahma in Hindu tradition. The scripture comprises 12 chapters, encompassing 2690 verses. The compiler, identified by the name "Manu," has led Hindus to associate the text with the first human and king in Indian history. The text reinforces a rigid caste system, positioning Brahmins at the summit and Shudras at the base. Dalits, previously termed "Ati-Shudras" or "Untouchables," were excluded from the varna system, rendering them vulnerable across social, economic, and political dimensions. The Manusmriti, also known as the *Laws of Manu*, played a crucial role in structuring ancient Indian society. For centuries, it has been regarded as a *dharmashastra*, prescribing norms for social behaviour, duties, and caste-specific regulations. It has been a topic of debate and criticism because it is believed that it has provisions that are discriminatory, especially towards women and lower castes (Sato). The concept of Dharma is central to understanding the ancient Indian legal system (Menski). The Vedas, the *Dharmashastras*, and the Constitution form the fundamental sources of Right for Hindus (Carbone). Dharma is a complex concept with no direct equivalent in Western thought, encompassing righteousness,

duty, law, justice, and cosmic order (Mittal). Within the Mahabharata, Dharma's definition is dynamic, prompting inquiries into its precise meaning according to the epic (Sahgal). The concept is rooted in the cosmic order, which maintains balance in the universe and society. Individual dharma differs from organizational dharma, the latter representing an organization's core principles (Hawley). Adhering to one's dharma was seen as crucial for maintaining social harmony and cosmic balance (Rashid). Ancient Indian legal theories integrated retributive justice and deterrence (Linderborg). The idea of karma, deeply entrenched in pre-Hindu India, posits that an individual's deeds in past and present lives determine their future experiences (Clooney). This principle implies that suffering is a consequence of past actions, influencing legal and social structures (Keshavan, Hegde, and Bhargav). This intricate framework, deeply rooted in the principle of karma, elucidates the presence of inequalities and suffering within the world by attributing them to the cumulative effect of actions performed across multiple lifetimes, thereby shaping the socio-legal landscape of ancient India with profound implications for justice, ethics, and social stratification (Bhadeshiya, Shukla, and Muniapan). The Uniform Civil Code in India has stirred considerable debate, particularly regarding the potential influence of codified Hindu family law on its structure (Agnes). Enshrined in Article 44 of the Indian Constitution, the UCC aims to establish a unified set of laws governing personal matters like marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance for all citizens, irrespective of their religion (Sharma; Kumari). Currently, these aspects are governed by distinct personal laws based on religious affiliation. While the Constitution envisions a UCC, its implementation has been hindered by various political and social factors, leading to ongoing discussions about its feasibility and desirability (Kumari). The debate surrounding the UCC is multifaceted, involving considerations of



religious freedom, gender equality, and national integration (Herklotz). Despite the secular principles upon which the Indian Constitution is founded, religion remains intertwined with the country's political realities (Saadiya). Post-colonial states typically favored legal monism under centralized state organs, but India stands as an exception where normative unification has not been fully realized (Siddiqui). Complex political considerations often impede efforts to reform personal law systems (Ahmed). The enactment of a Uniform Civil Code supplemented by a regime of state-recognized religious alternative dispute settlement could potentially address concerns raised by the personal law system. Such a framework could provide valuable recognition for religious identities, support religious practice and expression, promote justice, and enhance group autonomy (Ahmed). The legal landscape in India distinguishes between criminal and civil law, which are consistently applied nationwide, and personal laws, which vary among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians (Datar). These personal laws govern matters such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption, reflecting the diverse religious customs and traditions prevalent in the country (Rashid). Laws governing Hindus, Christians, and Parsis are codified by the legislature, whereas the Muslim Personal Law is largely uncoded (Saadiya). This divergence in legal treatment underscores the complexity of reconciling religious diversity with the principles of equality and uniformity in the Indian legal system.

**2.2 Ancient Indian caste and patriarchy:** The ancient Indian caste system, grounded in Brahmanical ideology, delineated society into four varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—while excluding Dalits. Characterized as hereditary, hierarchical, and endogamous, the system's rules were codified in texts like the Manusmriti, thereby legitimizing the subjugation of lower castes, especially Shudras and Dalits. Ancient India was also profoundly patriarchal, relegating

women to subordinate roles across various facets of life through practices such as kanyadaan and stridharma, and restricting their access to education. Women's perspectives were notably absent from scriptural texts and decision-making processes. The Manusmriti further underscored the necessity of female protection, establishing a framework wherein caste and gender oppression were intertwined. Dalit women, in particular, were deprived of dignity, autonomy, and access to vital social resources, and often faced sexual exploitation, frequently at the hands of upper-caste men, without legal or social recourse. Their labor was exploited in both domestic and public spheres. This intersectional oppression, stemming from caste and patriarchy, fostered a complex system of marginalization that has endured for centuries and continues to manifest in contemporary India.

Colonial rule significantly altered the structure of the caste system by transforming flexible identity groups into fixed categories. British administrative and legal practices, such as census operations and land settlements, formalized caste identities, thereby solidifying caste divisions and exacerbating social inequalities (Sato). Furthermore, colonial policies selectively policed populations, especially nomadic tribes, whose mobile economies threatened state tax revenues, by branding them as criminals (Sinha). The introduction of modern education and governance systems provided opportunities for certain caste groups to ascend socially and economically, while simultaneously marginalizing others. These transformations disrupted traditional social hierarchies, influencing social reform movements and contributing to the politicization of caste identities in contemporary India. The Indian feminist movement emerged during this era, driven by middle- and upper-caste women who sought to address gender inequalities within the context of colonial modernity. However, their focus primarily remained on issues like

education, property rights, and marriage reform, often overlooking the distinct challenges faced by lower-caste women (Ayyathurai). The rise of critical caste feminism in the early twentieth century marked a significant turning point, addressing the intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women. Critical caste feminism challenged the oversight of caste and gender issues in Indian society, dating back to precolonial times (Ayyathurai). This perspective integrates the interconnected systems of oppression faced by women, particularly marginalized women, based on caste, gender, and class (Cherechés). Anti-caste feminists critiqued social media responses, without positioning the Indian criminal justice system as a just alternative. These activists and intellectuals underscored how patriarchy intersected with religion, culture, education, and economic structures, advocating for comprehensive social reforms that would tackle both caste-based discrimination and gender inequality (Ayyathurai). In this context, understanding the continuities between retributive and extrajudicial forms of punishment and the institutional and legal mechanisms of the Indian state becomes crucial (Subramanian and Sharma). The convergence of caste-based discrimination and gender inequality necessitated a new analytical lens to fully grasp the issues faced by marginalized women in India (Ayyathurai). Contemporary India is witnessing a proliferation of violence against women, as evidenced by data from the National Crime Records Bureau and other sources. This includes domestic violence, sexual assault, honor killings, and trafficking. The historical roots of this violence can be traced back to patriarchal norms entrenched during the pre-colonial era, when religious texts and customary laws justified the subordination of women (Ghai). The intersectionality of caste and gender further exacerbates violence against Dalit women, who are disproportionately targeted in these crimes, often with impunity due to social biases and systemic failures in the justice system. The rise of social media has

amplified both the visibility and the discourse surrounding gender-based violence in India (Subramanian and Sharma). Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become spaces for survivors to share their experiences and for activists to organize campaigns against gender injustice (Subramanian and Sharma). Digital activism plays a crucial role for women in integrating digital strategies in their fight against sexual violence (Chatterjee). Despite the potential for mobilization, the digital space also presents challenges, as marginalized groups such as Dalit women face barriers in accessing the internet and social media platforms (Chatterjee, Subramanian, and Sharma).

**2.3 Dalit Identity in Ancient:** The identity of Dalits is deeply intertwined with the historical oppression and injustice they have faced in India for millennia. Despite legal and constitutional measures intended to eradicate caste-based discrimination, Dalits continue to encounter discrimination across various aspects of life, including employment, education, and access to public spaces. The struggle for social and political rights is also closely linked to Dalit identity. Dalit leaders and activists have advocated for greater social and economic empowerment, as well as representation in government and other institutions. The experience of being Dalit is multifaceted and complex, encompassing discrimination, adversity, and resilience. Activism, characterized by vigorous campaigning for political or social change, plays a crucial role in addressing the systemic issues faced by marginalized communities (Simon). Dalit activists, in particular, are actively involved in advocating for governance that prioritizes the needs of the poor and promotes economic growth rooted in equity and social justice (Kumar). Despite the existence of laws and policies aimed at safeguarding their rights, Dalits often encounter obstacles in accessing justice and legal recourse (Hans). The rise of Dalit literature and other forms of cultural expression has played a significant role in

shaping and asserting Dalit identity. These creative mediums serve as powerful tools for articulating the experiences, perspectives, and aspirations of Dalits, challenging dominant narratives and fostering a sense of collective identity and pride. Online platforms have emerged as vital spaces for Dalits to mobilize, resist dominant caste narratives, and contribute to broader movements against caste-based discrimination (Thakur). Dalit online communities, in particular, provide safe environments for individuals to openly discuss issues related to caste discrimination, share experiences, and seek support without fear of judgment or stigma (Singh). By creating digital networks and archives, Dalits are actively countering the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of their communities in mainstream media, which is often controlled by upper-caste groups (Singh). Moreover, through online activism and advocacy, Dalits are leveraging digital tools to challenge caste-based discrimination and advocate for social justice. These online platforms serve as valuable resources for education, empowerment, and collective action, enabling Dalits to amplify their voices, connect with allies, and effect meaningful social change (Singh). Dalit identity is not only shaped by historical and social factors, but also by the concept of cultural politics, which has been instrumental in the fight against untouchability and the assertion of basic rights (Muthukkalanjiyam). In India, where caste-based discrimination remains a pervasive issue, digital activism has become increasingly crucial in challenging systemic inequalities and promoting social justice. Dalits have harnessed the power of online platforms to share their experiences of casteism, mobilize support, and advocate for policy changes. Despite facing numerous challenges, including limited access to technology and digital literacy, Dalit activists and organizations are utilizing social media, online campaigns, and digital storytelling to raise awareness, amplify marginalized voices, and demand accountability from those in power. According to a 2019 report, upper castes

demonstrate greater engagement on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram compared to other communities (Raman and Ratnamala). The intersection of technology and social activism presents both opportunities and challenges for the Dalit community.

### **3. Patriarchal and Caste-Based Oppression of Women**

The Manusmriti depicts women as intrinsically impure, posing a threat to the moral rectitude of men; thus, religious figures such as priests and Brahmins should exercise caution around them. Manusmriti 5:149 stipulates that a woman's life must be governed by male figures: her father in childhood, her husband after marriage, and her son in widowhood. A woman's separation from these male guardians is thought to dishonor her family and her husband's lineage. Moreover, Manusmriti 5:154 asserts that a woman's identity is entirely dependent on her husband, whom she is obligated to worship as a deity. Rituals and traditions often dictate that women should devote themselves to their husbands, viewing them as objects of worship and offering sacrifices for their well-being (Birendri). In a patriarchal society, a wife's primary duty is to serve her husband, while the husband's responsibility is to protect the family and ensure its prosperity (Jin). The establishment of the family system is often linked to fulfilling religious duties such as ancestor worship, producing male heirs, and transmitting social and religious traditions to subsequent generations (Sonawat). In many societies, the concept of honor is intricately linked to female sexuality, where a woman's sexual integrity, encompassing chastity and marital fidelity, symbolizes the honor of both herself and her family (Ji). This is particularly evident in patrilineal societies, where lineage and inheritance are traced through the male line. Consequently, controlling female sexuality becomes crucial for maintaining family honor and lineage purity. Transgressions of these

norms, such as premarital sex or adultery, are perceived as grave affronts to family honor, potentially leading to severe repercussions like ostracism, violence, or even honor killings. Cultural beliefs prevalent in certain societies emphasize the importance of female virginity, with single women expected to remain virgins (Alkaabba). Traditional male authority, which rested on the axes of men's economic provisioning, control over wives, and violence against women, is eroding in newer social conditions in which women are more autonomous (George). The text emphasizes sexual subjugation as a control mechanism, asserting a father's right to arrange his daughter's marriage, irrespective of her age. Manusmriti 9:15 posits an inherent inclination toward adultery in women, despite marital protection. Furthermore, verse 9:17 characterizes women as inherently lustful, envious, greedy, manipulative, fond of adornments, and prone to sexual temptation. According to 9:18, women are deemed incapable of achieving religious purity due to a lack of understanding of sacred texts. Additionally, they are denied property rights and are promised salvation contingent upon lifelong obedience to their husbands. Sagodari's radical questioning of child marriage exposes the motives of privileged-caste males, specifically their sexual exploitation, concealed behind the rules of child marriage and the prevention of widow remarriage (Ayyathurai). Indeed, her arguments challenged the prevailing norms by suggesting that delaying the marriage of girls who have attained puberty may lead to the loss of their virginity through premarital relationships, thereby questioning the very basis upon which early marriage was justified (Birendri). The birth of a son is often seen as a symbol of light and joy, while the birth of a daughter can be perceived as the root of sorrow, reflecting societal expectations and biases (Sharma). This framework resonates with Butler's explication that a presupposition of humanness governs the recognizability of the human, informing how we recognize ourselves

at the level of feeling, desire, and the body (Ayyathurai). Such presuppositions are in operation in the production of gendered and racialized subjects who are always measured against an unachievable norm. Gender performativity, as articulated by Butler, highlights the performative nature of gender, which is constructed through repetitive acts and discourses, shaping individual identities and societal expectations (Zare). In this context, the control over women's sexuality becomes a means of maintaining caste purity and patriarchal dominance, as any deviation from prescribed norms is met with severe consequences. The outrage felt by upper-caste kinsmen when their daughters elope with Dalit men highlights the patriarchal sense of ownership over women's bodies and the role those bodies play in the larger political economy (Kang). Colorism, deeply entrenched in Indian society, manifests as a preference for lighter skin tones and results in significant social discrimination, especially affecting women from marginalized communities (Kukreja). This discrimination intersects with caste, gender, and class, exacerbating the vulnerabilities of Dalit women, who often face multiple layers of oppression (Cherechés). Inter-caste relationships, particularly those involving Dalit individuals, frequently encounter fierce resistance and violence, reflecting deep-seated caste prejudices and the desire to maintain social hierarchies (Kang). Dalit women experience a particularly acute form of marginalization, stemming from both caste and gender-based discrimination. While upper-caste women are often subjected to domestic subjugation, Dalit women face violence and exploitation both within their families and in broader social contexts. Despite the perception of Dalits as impure by upper-caste individuals, Dalit women are often subjected to sexual exploitation. One egregious practice involves the assignment of young Dalit girls as Devadasis in temples, where Brahmin priests exploit them sexually under the guise of religious service. Mainstream Indian feminists and upper-caste



Marxists have been criticized for overlooking these practices, potentially due to their own caste biases. This oversight highlights the systemic neglect of Dalit women's issues within broader feminist and socialist movements, underscoring the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to social justice. Dalit women's literature powerfully captures their experiences, representing the often sexually charged language they use (Hubel). Their speech and expressions are viewed as potential acts of defiance against both casteism and patriarchy (Sethi and Nayak). Such defiance challenges conventional expectations of feminine behavior and decorum, offering a compelling model for resistance that mainstream feminism can learn from (Hubel). Many Dalit literary expressions predominantly reflect the perspectives of male members within the community, with women's presence remaining limited (Placid). There is a need to understand the nuanced perspectives of Dalit women within literature (Sethi and Nayak). Dalit women's narratives often challenge the patriarchal and casteist structures that govern their lives, advocating for their rights and highlighting their contributions to society. Recent incidents of violence against Dalits, such as the assault on an 18-year-old Dalit boy and the gang rape and murder of a 9-year-old Dalit girl, underscore the ongoing atrocities faced by this community (Kang). These events highlight the urgent need for increased social and legal protections for Dalits, particularly women and children, who are disproportionately affected by caste-based violence and discrimination (Kumar). Dalits continue to face social discrimination, physical violence, and poverty, with a significant portion of welfare measures remaining unfulfilled (Hans). The discrimination against Dalit communities in India is pervasive (Simon). In her novel *Sangati*, Dalit writer Bama voices strong disapproval of these complex injustices, probing whether Dalits are to blame for their caste. She brings attention to the intensified hardship experienced by Dalit women, who not only have

to deal with male dominance but also caste-related insults from women of other castes (Bama 2005, pp. 121–122). The Manusmriti depicts women as fundamentally inferior, deceptive, and insignificant, systematically depriving them of personal freedom and autonomy. The text forbids women from engaging in religious ceremonies, gaining knowledge, or studying the Vedas. Their purpose is limited exclusively to household duties and serving the male family members. This is reflected in verse 2.213 of the Manusmriti (Manusmriti, 2.213).

"Svabhāva eṣa nārīṇāṃ narāṇāmiha  
dūṣaṇam |  
Ato'rthāṇna pramādyanti pramadāsu  
vipāścitaḥ ||"

#### 4 The intersection of gender and caste

Dalit women experienced a unique form of triple marginalization based on the convergence of caste, gender, and economic status, exceeding the discrimination faced by Dalits and women separately. Sexual abuse was a common form of exploitation perpetrated by upper-caste men against Dalit women, often normalized within the framework of caste hierarchies. Economic exploitation manifested in the form of compulsory domestic service and bonded labor for upper-caste households. Social stigma further contributed to their oppression, as Dalit women were subjected to violence and dehumanization due to perceptions of their bodies as impure and sexually accessible. Understanding these multifaceted layers of oppression requires the application of intersectionality, a concept developed by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality acknowledges that identities extend beyond single categories such as "woman" or "Dalit," recognizing the complex interplay of various forms of oppression (Cherechés). This framework considers the unique experiences of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups, highlighting how these identities intersect to create distinct

forms of discrimination (Arora). Intersectionality acknowledges that identities extend beyond single categories such as "woman" or "Dalit," recognizing the complex interplay of various forms of oppression (Monteiro and Nalini). Moreover, the framework enables us to move past the limitations of single-axis analysis, which assumes that all members of a particular group experience oppression in the same way. Instead, intersectionality recognizes that the experiences of individuals are shaped by the convergence of multiple identities and social locations (Wilkins-Yel, Hyman, and Zounlomè). Intersectionality theory posits that fundamental dimensions of cultural identity, which include but are not limited to race, gender, and socioeconomic status, interrelate with each other and can be indicators of chronic illness in avoidable ways (Dixon). The intersectional approach illuminates the limitations of both feminist and anti-racist movements that often fail to address the specific experiences of women of color and other multiply marginalized groups (Bose). For instance, a study of Tamil Buddhists underscores how patriarchy intersected with religio-cultural, educational, and emotional aspects of Indian society (Ayyathurai). By recognizing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women, intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of power relations and social inequalities.

#### **4.1 Double Marginalization, Lack of Agency, Comparison with Upper-Caste Women:**

Double marginalization describes the concurrent oppression experienced by individuals or groups due to the intersecting systems of caste hierarchy and patriarchy. Dalit women, in particular, encounter dual exploitation rooted in both gender and caste, manifesting as sexual violence, restricted access to leadership, and exclusion from decision-making processes. This intersectionality results in a lack of social, political, and economic agency, often leading to their voices being marginalized. The unique challenges faced by

Dalit women, which are often more complex than those of upper-caste women, underscore the importance of an intersectional feminist framework that addresses both caste and gender. A comparative analysis of the experiences of Dalit women and upper-caste women reveals the necessity for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to feminism. The necessity to understand the intricacies of societal institutions and their effects on marginalized populations becomes paramount in the discourse surrounding caste and gender (Birendri). Intersectionality provides a vital framework for understanding the lived experiences of Dalit women, acknowledging the complexity of their identities that extend beyond singular categories such as "woman" or "Dalit" (Bose). Consequently, intersectionality serves as a critical analytical tool, providing a more granular and context-specific understanding of the oppressive realities faced by Dalit women, acknowledging the interwoven nature of caste and gender-based discrimination (Carbado et al.). Recognizing the intersectional nature of caste and gender is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat marginalization (Wilkins-Yel, Hyman, and Zounlomè). The intersectionality theory emerged in the 1980s, intending to address the interconnected systems of oppression experienced by women, especially black women, based on race, gender, and class (Cherechés). The framework of intersectionality highlights simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity in the oppression systems (Carastathis). An intersectional approach requires dismantling oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality, as it takes into account the compounded effect of multiple forms of discrimination, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and caste (Geller). This perspective acknowledges that gender, caste, class, and other forms of identity are mutually constitutive, shaping individual experiences in unique ways (Pogrebna et al.). Critical caste feminism emerges as a crucial lens through which to examine Indian society,

particularly its historical oversight of caste and gender issues (Ayyathurai). In addition to critical caste feminism, critical caste studies offer a complementary, interdisciplinary lens, rigorously examining caste-based ideologies, material culture, aesthetic expressions, institutional frameworks, and societal practices that permeate Indian society (Piantato and Piantato; Williams and Lewis; Subramanian and Sharma).

### 5. Voicing Resistance through Critical Intervention.

Despite the Indian Constitution's legal abolition of "untouchability" and prohibition of caste-based discrimination, this issue remains a challenge (Constitution of India, Article 17). Despite the legal abolition of "untouchability" and the prohibition of caste-based discrimination in the Indian Constitution, the enduring influence of Brahmanical texts such as the Manusmriti continues to shape India's socio-cultural and political environment. These ancient texts established a rigid caste system that marginalized Dalits, particularly Dalit women, denying them dignity, autonomy, and fundamental rights (Buhler 1886). The Manusmriti, for example, delineates roles that strip Shudras and women of their humanity, thereby formalizing a system of gendered caste subjugation that continues to manifest in contemporary society. Despite constitutional protections, Dalit women currently experience intensified discrimination as a result of the convergence of caste, class, and gender. They face disproportionately high rates of sexual violence, exploitative working conditions, and limited access to education (Guha 2009). Legal and political measures may not be enough to eradicate deeply entrenched systems of caste-based patriarchy; therefore, cultural and literary actions are crucial for contesting dominant narratives. Writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar embody this form of literary resistance. Bama, in her autobiographical novel *Karukku*, recounts the indignities she faced as a Dalit Christian woman, highlighting the

pervasive violence inherent in caste-based societies. She contends, "We too are human beings, but no one seems to see our suffering as unjust" [citation needed]. Her account serves not only as a personal declaration but also as a defiant challenge to prevailing social norms (Bama 2000, p. 27). Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* offers a critical analysis of internalized oppression within Dalit communities, particularly among women, illustrating the pervasiveness of caste ideology in personal and domestic spheres. She directly confronts both the Brahmanical system and patriarchal tendencies present within her own community (Kamble 2008). Kamble asserts, "Our subjugation was comprehensive – encompassing domestic, communal, agricultural, and economic spheres. This state of bondage was our birthright". Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* interweaves personal narrative with social critique, highlighting the erasure of Dalit women's perspectives in both mainstream feminist and Dalit discourses. She underscores the necessity of intersectional representation, stating, "My Dalitness cannot be separated from my womanhood. The two are not layered but fused (Pawar 2008, p. 143). These narratives function as significant interventions by recuperating marginalized histories and introducing alternative epistemologies grounded in lived experiences. By documenting their experiences, Dalit women authors challenge the hegemony of texts such as the Manusmriti, which historically justified their exclusion. Their accounts create a counter-memory, disrupting dominant narratives and asserting agency through writing. Moreover, scholars like Sharmila Rege highlight the epistemological value of Dalit women's testimonies, describing them as "collective and political narratives" that challenge both upper-caste feminism and Brahmanical historiography (Rege 2006, p. 14). In summation, Dalit women writers actively disrupt inherited systems of caste oppression through both their lived experiences of resistance and their transformation of personal suffering into

politically actionable knowledge. Their literary contributions function as salient acts of resistance, critically engaging with and dismantling the cultural legacies of texts such as the Manusmriti. By means of these interventions, they assert their agency, reclaiming their voices, histories, and the right to self-definition.

## 6. Conclusion

The *Manusmriti* instituted a system of caste and gender-based oppression that profoundly and enduringly affected Dalit women. This text formalized social conventions that fostered discrimination and curtailed opportunities for Dalit women across various domains, including education, economic involvement, and social standing. An intersectional examination of the text exposes the degree of structural violence directed at them, underscoring how the convergence of caste and gender biases engendered distinctive forms of subjugation. Nevertheless, some academics argue that interpretations of the Manusmriti vary, and its influence on Dalit women may not be as consistent as depicted, implying a more intricate historical context. Comprehending this historical backdrop is crucial for shaping contemporary efforts to promote Dalit women's rights and social equity, as it offers insights into the origins of inequality and the persistent challenges encountered by marginalized communities.

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